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Socially Useful Production in the Defence Industry: The Lucas Aerospace Combine Committee and the Labour Government, 1974-79

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In the late 1960s, a workers' movement at Lucas Aerospace was formed and proposed alternative products other than military production. Reacting to some 5,000 redundancies in the company across its thirteen sites nationally, a 'combine' committee of shop-stewards and workers accused the company management of lobbying for defence orders ahead of civilian manufacturing. Despite acclaim for the combine from the left-wing of the Labour Party and the disarmament movement, the 1974-79 Labour Government did not favour the workers' proposals and referred the combine to the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions. Behind the scenes, Labour ministers at the Department of Industry felt that the combine would upset the balance of the defence industry, which was at that time an important contributor to employment and the balance of payments, as well as Britain's military role in the Cold War.

Keywords: Lucas Aerospace, Defence Industry, Labour Party, Trade Unions, Cold War

Introduction

Britain witnessed a long series of industrial crises throughout manufacturing in the 1970s. The decade was blighted by company bankruptcies, increased unemployment, intense competition from markets overseas and trade union pay-claim disputes that felled the Conservative Government in 1974 and the Labour Government in 1979.¹ However, the focus upon industrial policy in the 1970s has neglected to make the link between the defence industry and that of Britain's Cold War role, with a few important exceptions.² Britain's international role relied heavily on procuring armaments from domestic manufacturers, providing a major employment base in the process.³ A fresh historical focus on the British defence industry in the Cold War has emerged in the last decade, recovering Britain's significance as a military power, with a particular emphasis on the relationship between the defence industry and the state.⁴ This reassessment of Britain's defence economy has provided a new framework for a new examination of industrial relations in the 1970s.

Stemming from a climate of economic crises throughout the decade, public expenditure came in for significant scrutiny from both within and outside government. The political economy of government policy came under unprecedented examination by the British academic and political left during this decade, with a focus towards defence expenditure and foreign policy. The left asserted that since the Second World War the political establishment pursued a defence role that had wasted Britain's scientific and technological resources. There was a considerable critique from the left

from the mid-1970s into the 1980s, including sophisticated alternate defence policies based around reduced spending.⁵ Central to these critiques were analyses of the defence industry, which had been previously unexamined by a left-wing movement which had focused primarily on nuclear disarmament in the 1950s and 1960s.⁶ By the 1970s, the left saw the defence industry as having the potential to be ‘converted’ to production for social use, such as healthcare and affordable transport. ‘Industrial conversion’ and ‘socially useful production’ entered the lexicon of the wider British left in the 1970s. Nonetheless, the academic authors of these critiques were in the main untrained in engineering or scientific disciplines and could not offer alternatives to defence production that had been tried and tested on the factory floor.

This situation was changed by the arrival of the Lucas Aerospace Shop Stewards Combine Committee that came to the attention of the Labour Party and the wider left in the mid-1970s. Composed of mechanical engineers and led by politically motivated left-wing shop stewards, the Lucas combine sought to convert its company to socially useful production. The combine met with Tony Benn, the Labour industry minister, and published its alternative plan in 1975.⁷ Yet despite its left-wing inclinations, the combine was deeply suspicious of the Labour Government due to Labour’s industrial policies in the 1960s which the Lucas workers blamed for having contributed to causing redundancies in the company in the 1960s. The left-wing of the Labour Party, which was especially critical of the 1974-79 Labour Government, held up the combine as the best example of how industrial conversion could be achieved.⁸ Nonetheless, the combine operated independently of the Labour Party, and formed its own conclusions on how military industry enjoyed a close relationship with the state. Although having not achieved its ambitions, the Lucas combine had revealed the protectionist tendencies of the Labour Government when it came to the defence industry.

While the case of Lucas Aerospace has been recognised in both contemporary and historical accounts, its significance in regards to the defence industry has not been significantly analysed. David Edgerton has argued that the combine missed the impact of the ‘warfare state a critical moment’ in the 1970s.⁹ This was due to the attention of the combine being overtly towards ousting the Lucas management and revolutionising the role of the shop-floor within industry. Contributing to disarmament in the Cold War, though an aim of the combine, was secondary to that of achieving control of industrial production. The threat of Cold War military-industrial complexes was only more fully grasped after the combine had run its course in the late 1970s, and was more clearly articulated by social scientists who wrote accounts of the combine than by the workers themselves.¹⁰ This article will therefore place the Lucas combine within the context of the British Cold War defence industry. The correspondence the combine received from Labour ministers, together with declassified files from within the government, revealed the extent to which the defence industry was prioritised as indispensable political capital and a source of employment and technological development. This article will detail the origin of the Lucas combine, before accounting for the reaction it faced from the triad of the company management, Labour Government, and trade unions.

Origins of the ‘Lucas Plan’

Lucas Aerospace was a significant player in British aircraft manufacturing, and could claim to be Europe’s largest designer and manufacturer of aircraft systems and equipment.¹¹ Roughly half of the company’s turnover came from engine fuel systems that offered the aircraft industry the largest available range of aerospace engine

equipment available from a single firm.¹² Lucas provided equipment to the major defence-aerospace companies in Britain, including British Aerospace Corporation (BAC), Ferranti and Rolls-Royce. Approximately half of the company's output was in the defence sector, with an estimated 43% in military aircraft and a further 7% in other defence industries.¹³ The value of military production to the company prompted the formation of 'Lucas Defence Systems' in 1973 to focus on military equipment specifically, which included electrical equipment for Britain's Main-Battle Tank in the 1970s.¹⁴ Lucas was also involved with the international Multi-Role Combat Aircraft (MRCA) that was shared by Britain, West Germany and Italy, as well as the Anglo-French Jaguar civilian aircraft. On the civil side, the company had a close working relationship played an active role in the supersonic aircraft, Concorde, and the Russian TU-144.

Despite its high standing in the industry, Lucas Aerospace was not immune from the crises in the British aerospace industry, specifically the cancellation of the British TSR-2 (Tactical Strike Reconnaissance) military aircraft in 1965 and the collapse of Rolls-Royce in 1971. The TSR-2 aircraft was cancelled by the Labour Government in 1965 on the basis that it did not offer enough potential on the export market.¹⁵ The cost of the TSR-2 had soared beyond initial estimates, as the development had been initiated by the Conservative Government in the late 1950s to replace the Vulcan bomber force. The officially commissioned history of the company, *Lucas: The First Hundred Years*, was critical of the cancellation by the Labour Government in 1965, and claimed that ending the TSR-2 'halved the aircraft industry at one blow' in Britain.¹⁶ The official history of the company, published in 1978, was favourable towards the defence industry, and argued that 'TSR-2 [had] put Lucas into a whole new field of business for airframe and technology, much of which withered on the vine' after the project's cancellation.¹⁷ Nonetheless, despite the setback of TSR-2, the company management remained dedicated to defence production into the 1970s.

The decision to remain a defence manufacturer at this point was one of the key reasons why workers in the company formed a combine committee. Formed in the late 1960s, before gaining momentum in the mid-1970s, the Lucas combine's experience was examined in a comprehensive paperback published in 1982, *Lucas: A New Trade Unionism in the Making?*, authored by social scientists Hillary Wainwright and Dave Elliot. Amidst escalating job losses in industry and rising Cold War tensions, Wainwright and Elliot opened their account by stating that the 'two main threats to society' in the early 1980s were 'unemployment and war'.¹⁸ The authors argued that the combine's example of peaceful production for social utility could avert both fears simultaneously. The text included comprehensive insights from combine members who recollected each stage in the experience, from formulating the plan until its eventual defeat when the management and Labour Government refused to support it. The tone of the book was often bitter towards the 1974-79 Labour Government which passed the combine over to unsympathetic trade unions.

The acrimonious relations between the combine and the 1974-79 Labour Government had its roots in Labour's policies in the previous decade. Over the course of the late 1960s, Labour implemented a policy of 'rationalization', or concentration of successful firms into larger conglomerates.¹⁹ The Government's actions were deeply resented by Lucas employees, especially those Labour-voting workers who had held out hope of the modernising reforms that was pledged by the Party's 'white heat of the scientific revolution'.²⁰ The laying-off of 5,000 workers from 1970-5 was attributed to Labour's 1960s rationalisation policy, both by the combine and Lucas

Aerospace's official history. A decade later, when considering its own origins, the Lucas combine argued that it was 'as much the child of Harold Wilson as it was of Lucas Aerospace itself'.²¹ This was a critical point, for it explained how the combine's scepticism of the 1974-79 Labour Government's plans to bring the aerospace industry into public ownership. By the early 1970s the aerospace industry continued to face serious problems. This was seen especially in the Rolls-Royce bankruptcy crisis, which in turn had a rapid impact on Lucas Aerospace.²² The official history noted how the company 'had to cut back their workforce in the aircraft factories from 18,000 to 15,000', before claiming that 'all those being made redundant were fairly treated'.²³ This account was later criticised by the combine as having made both rationalisation and the Rolls Royce crisis sound 'remarkably effortless and painless'.²⁴ Instead, Lucas Aerospace workers recalled their experience of how 'almost overnight', two thousand Lucas workers in Birmingham, Liverpool, and Wolverhampton lost their jobs. The numbers of workers employed in aerospace had reduced by the 1970s from 283,000 to 190,000, with further losses predicted.²⁵ It was felt that the traditional method of trade union agitation against management had failed to secure stable employment and that a new departure was needed from the workers themselves.

The first initial meetings of the combine occurred in 1969, with increasing frequency into the early 1970s. The combine consisted of representative shop stewards from each of Lucas' thirteen nationwide sites, which together formed an executive council which met quarterly, initially at Wortley Hall in Sheffield.²⁶ While the combine was eager to foster as much workers' participation as possible, it was clear that several figures were becoming prominent in giving both intellectual inspiration and leadership to the workers' campaign. Mike Cooley and Eric Scarbrow, two shop stewards and former British Communist Party members based at the Lucas site at Willesden, occupied the key posts of secretary and chairman respectively, and it was they who provided the main link to the Labour Party and the wider left.²⁷ The key ambition of the combine was to change both the company's means of production and to decide what products would be manufactured instead. Cutting loose from public ownership would, the combine argued, 'reduce the nagging insecurity' that 'overshadowed the industry for years', and instead give the workforce a 'real sense of direction and purpose'.²⁸

Another key aim alongside self-sufficiency was disarmament. Both of Labour's 1974 General Election manifestos sought to reduce defence spending, and the Lucas combine welcomed this development, even if it threatened projects that their company was involved in. Instead, the proposed cuts in defence expenditure reinforced the combine's desire for peaceful production, with such spending reductions thought as being 'both inevitable and desirable' and that it was the 'national policy of almost all the unions in the combine committee that there should be cuts in defence expenditure'.²⁹ The joint threat of unemployment and war, the combine contended, was commonly thought to 'be beyond the remit of ordinary workers'. The perception existed that 'technological and market pressures' were producing the constant threat of redundancy, and with it the parallel concern that 'the momentum of the military machine [was] carrying with it the threat of extermination'.³⁰ A company heavily reliant on defence contracts, such as Lucas Aerospace, was seen by the combine as being liable to political vicissitudes, catering to continually more advanced military technology.³¹ This had been the case for TSR-2 in the 1960s as it had been for the Tornado in the 1970s. Anxious over tumultuous employment conditions, the workers at Lucas demonstrated 'in a most practical way

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3 how people without any official power might reverse both the drive towards
4 militarism and the growth of unemployment'.³²

5 The combine stepped up its activism when Labour returned to Government in
6 February 1974. Meetings had been more frequent from 1972-3, and had created the
7 first drafts of what would form the combine's plan for alternative production. The first
8 success of the combine was its meeting with Labour's industry secretary, Tony Benn,
9 in November 1974. A meeting had been requested with the minister, with the combine
10 hoping that the left-wing technocrat Benn would enable 'the skill and ability' of the
11 workers to be properly synchronised for the benefit of the community as a whole', but
12 not like the 'appalling examples of the past' where industry was left in the hands of
13 'bungling autocrats'.³³ Speaking on behalf of the combine, Ernie Scarbrow claimed
14 that the workers were open to the idea of Labour's proposals, but only if members
15 could 'utilise their skills in the interests of the community'.³⁴ Benn, who had
16 previously shown support for other campaigns for workers' control, enthusiastically
17 agreed to the meeting and assured the combine 'that full provision would be made for
18 measures to extend industrial democracy'.³⁵

19 A deputation of some thirty-three combine members met Benn in his
20 ministerial office, with some already sensing the 'irritation of senior civil servants and
21 some national trade union officials' at them being allowed inside the Department of
22 Industry.³⁶ This 'irritation' was symptomatic of how exceptional the minister's views
23 were by contrast to the civil service and the rest of the Labour Government. Benn,
24 who had been Minister for Technology from 1966-70 when Labour was last in power,
25 had been greatly impressed by the movement for workers' control when Labour was
26 in opposition from 1970-4. He roused support for the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders in
27 1972 when the workers there organised a 'work-in' to maintain production even after
28 the company had announced it could no longer afford to pay most its staff.³⁷ Having
29 largely centrist views in the 1960s he then moved further to the left, advocating a
30 significant increase in public ownership and opposing both the Common Market and
31 the nuclear deterrent. By comparison, his two ministers of state, Gerald Kaufman and
32 Eric Varley, were less than impressed by his 'hobby-horse of unviable workers' co-
33 operatives'.³⁸ In his 1980 account, *How to be a Minister*, Kaufman mocked Benn who
34 'with very little knowledge or experience of working-class life, was so enchanted with
35 the very idea of shop stewards that he saw groups of them at his Departmental
36 headquarters whenever they asked to see him and was even rumoured to have a
37 special room set aside for them'.³⁹

38 This was precisely the case in Benn's meeting with the Lucas combine in his
39 offices in Victoria Street in November 1974. The Labour minister was evidently
40 impressed by what he saw as 'a pioneering combine' and 'hoped that that the
41 development would become much more widely known and repeated throughout
42 industry'.⁴⁰ He issued further encouragement to the combine, citing that within public
43 ownership [Labour] will be aiming to ensure that those who work in the industry can
44 play a vital part in controlling their own destiny'.⁴¹ In the meeting Benn was evidently
45 in favour of industrial conversion, remarking in light of the disruption to employment
46 that could be caused by defence cuts, industry 'should be thinking of ways of
47 producing our way through a slump... and be prepared to diversify'.⁴² In his diary
48 entry, Benn noted the impressive nature of the plans drawn up by the combine. 'In the
49 afternoon', he recalled, 'I went to one of the most inspiring meetings I have ever
50 attended, the best organised combine in the country with all the unions represented...
51 they are in fact a complete shadow administration of a very important kind... I found
52 myself wholly in sympathy with them'.⁴³ Later, when the combine launched its formal
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3 plan in January 1976, he noted that 'they have launched their corporate plan which I
4 had encouraged them to do... I was very impressed... by God they have produced
5 some excellent stuff - it just shows what the shop floor is capable of'.⁴⁴

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7 Despite the enthusiasm from Labour's industry secretary, the shop-stewards
8 and workers in the combine remained sceptical of Labour's plans to nationalise the
9 aerospace industry. A meeting of the combine's leadership in January 1975 prompted
10 moving towards workers' control of industry instead of a reliance on state
11 intervention. The response from the Lucas workers was to organise quarterly meetings
12 which reviewed ideas from each of its thirteen factories across Britain. Each site was
13 represented by a shop steward who presented ideas to the combine's leadership.⁴⁵
14 Members of the combine to questioned the assumption of military production upon
15 which Lucas Aerospace had long relied as a profitable output. Phil Asquith, a Lucas
16 Aerospace shop steward and member of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament
17 (CND), spoke for many when he claimed 'we were not going to be lobbying for more
18 military orders like some of us had done in the past'.⁴⁶ Alternative production was
19 motivated by a resistance towards armaments production. This was prompted the
20 climate of competition that favoured cost-effective standardisation. The result was
21 frustration for the Lucas engineers. This was exhibited in two ways: first that
22 innovative projects would be turned down by management; and secondly, that if
23 projects became more elaborate, the contribution of the worker became 'more
24 restricted, more fragmented and less satisfying'.⁴⁷

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26 In January 1976, the combine unveiled their proposals 'to a crowded press
27 conference in the upstairs room of a Fleet Street pub' in London.⁴⁸ It was the
28 culmination of several months of drafting, incorporating suggestions from workers,
29 and it consisted of some 200 pages of material, with 150 alternative products drawn
30 up by shop-stewards and workers. The content of the plan was later viewed as a
31 change of direction, representing 'a shift away from a total reliance on the
32 government' towards 'unilateral development of a detailed worker-generated
33 corporate plan'.⁴⁹ It was felt that 'this level of self reliance meant that the [combine]
34 committee was able to develop much more adventurous and technically sophisticated
35 proposals which were suited to their strategic needs' and demanded 'the right to work
36 on socially useful and needed technologies'.⁵⁰ This encompassed two underlying
37 aims: firstly to 'protect members' right to work in the event of further cutbacks in the
38 aerospace industry' and secondly 'to ensure that among the products proposed, there
39 would be a number that would be socially useful to the company at large'.⁵¹ This
40 ambition was reflected in the alternative products that were suggested. In healthcare,
41 design teams had exhibited a proto-type for the 'hobcart' mobility vehicle for children
42 with spina bifida; dialysis machines for kidney operations; and a 'heat-pump', which
43 worked along the same principles as a refrigerator, which supplied heat in an energy-
44 efficient manner. In the sphere of infrastructure, there was the road-rail hybrid vehicle
45 - a bus that was enabled to also drive on railways.

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47 The combine was evidently anti-militaristic and hinged their proposals on the
48 instability of the armaments market and the defence cuts planned by the Labour
49 Government. These cuts were regarded by the combine's plan as being both
50 'inevitable and desirable'.⁵² The combine tapped into the broader uncertainty
51 regarding the Labour Government's spending plans in which wide-ranging cuts were
52 predicted over a whole range of social services. The combine argued that 'in order to
53 make its austerity measures somewhat acceptable, the government will at least have to
54 make a gesture towards cuts in defence expenditure'.⁵³ It went further to reference the
55 Labour defence secretary Roy Mason, who had announced in the Commons his
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prediction that from the government there would be ‘a marked reduction over the next decade in the level of activity in military aerospace projects, particularly on the design side’.⁵⁴ Recent memory from the 1960s was plagued by the traumas of cancelled defence projects and the ensuing unemployment that followed, and the combine forecasted more uncertainty to come. For the next three years, this issue of the virtue of military industry was a key point of contention between the combine and its detractors in the Lucas management, the trade unions and the Labour Government.

The reaction from the Lucas Aerospace management

As the combine drew up their proposals during 1975, the Lucas Aerospace management exhibited no signs of departing from defence production. In the company’s 1975 annual report, turnover was described as ‘disappointing’ and was explained by low output in some sectors and ‘some grave industrial disputes’ - a reference to industrial action in Lucas Aerospace at Burnley and Willesden.⁵⁵ Despite the unimpressive turnover, a ‘substantial improvement in results’ was expected and this was attributed in no small part to sustaining a presence in the military sector. It was felt that the defence reductions would ‘not immediately affect business, but future programmes’ with military orders forecasted to ‘contribute some £200m to Lucas Aerospace over the next decade’. Export potential was also perceived in other projects in the Defence Review, including the Jaguar, Hawk and Sea Harrier. It was evident that relations between the management and some workers were already tense before the combine set about its campaign for industrial conversion. In a final statement in the company’s report, the management contended with reference to industrial disputes, that ‘the real success of the business can only occur with the co-operation of all concerned’.⁵⁶

The wording of the combine’s plan, in particular the desirability of the defence cuts, was met with a sharp response of the Lucas Aerospace management three months later. Resisting the combine’s arguments about the Labour Government’s reductions in defence expenditure, the Lucas management remarked that ‘the recent defence cuts had not affected Lucas Aerospace to any great extent’.⁵⁷ There was something to be said of this judgement by the management, given that the Labour Government’s Defence Review had planned a gradual phased reduction of some 10,000 workers in the aerospace industry (or 4% of the total in the UK) over the course of 1975-80.⁵⁸ The management’s response went further to question the motives behind the combine, in particular their opposition to defence spending:

The authors of the report suggest that there would be a contraction in the aerospace components industry as a result of successive Defence Cuts, a trend which they regard as desirable. On this premise they believe that the Company should be protecting the jobs of its employees by diversifying into socially acceptable/useful products, such as those indicated in the report’.⁵⁹

The management disagreed fundamentally with the combine on the value of the defence industry. Lucas Aerospace could not ‘accept that aircraft, military or civil, do not have a social utility [as] civil aircraft are needed for business and pleasure activities, and it is necessary to maintain military aircraft for Defence’.⁶⁰ The combine perceived the response as an outright rejection due to its proposal to ‘refer these

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3 matters to the local consultative machinery' - an allusion to the trade unions.⁶¹ This
4 was seen by the combine as Lucas Aerospace kicking the plan into touch in which the
5 initiative's fate would be decided by a network of trade union representatives. A
6 series of acerbic letters followed between the combine and the management. When
7 Ernie Scarbrow, the combine's secretary, requested material and manpower resources
8 for further research, the response from the company was to employ the resources
9 available from the trade unions.⁶² The continuation of referrals to the unions infuriated
10 the combine, which cited how the lack of official recognition 'represented a complete
11 shift in the Company's policy' and 'departed from industrial relations custom and
12 practice over the last five years'.⁶³ Still smarting from the official Lucas response to
13 the workers' plan, Scarbrow warned that to 'have reached this decision without any
14 negotiation represents for us a serious situation'.⁶⁴
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17 **The reaction from the Labour Party and the disarmament movement**

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19 After from the rejection of the plan by the Lucas management, the combine appealed
20 for assistance by Labour Government ministers at the Department of Industry. In a
21 letter to the industry secretary Eric Varley on 14 October 1976, Ernie Scarbrow
22 lamented how 'the company have blankly refused to meet our combine committee,
23 instead giving small, disconnected pieces of information to each site to prevent the
24 trade unions as a whole having an overview of the company's policies'.⁶⁵ Varley did
25 not personally respond, but the combine received a reply from the minister of state
26 Gerald Kaufman, who was sceptical of the combine and of the concept of workers'
27 control of industry. Like the Lucas management, Kaufman believed that the best
28 course of action to pursue the issue was 'through the accepted trade union
29 machinery'.⁶⁶ This route would mean that that the Department of Industry would defer
30 to the relevant trade unions who act as an intermediary between the combine and the
31 Lucas management. This began a tense relationship between the combine and the
32 Department of Industry over the next four years. In a response to Kaufman, Scarbrow
33 reiterated that Lucas Aerospace was refusing to meet the combine both to discuss the
34 plan and the Government's tripartite strategy'.⁶⁷ A letter from the other minister of
35 state in the Department, Les Huckfield, continued on the same line, stating that it was
36 a matter for the company and its employees to consider 'a number of suggestions in
37 the Plan'.⁶⁸ The combine began to speculate as to what support the Labour ministers
38 in the Department of Industry were showing.
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42 However, the combine did receive a much favourable reaction from the
43 Labour left who promoted the importance of the combine within the Government.
44 Left-wing Labour MPs were by the mid-1970s engaged with their own alternative
45 plan to reduce defence spending and convert military industry into socially useful
46 production. In 1974 the Labour left set up a study group on the party's National
47 Executive Committee (NEC) to examine the potential for industrial conversion. The
48 Lucas combine was the best example of how conversion could be achieved, and was
49 lauded by the left on the study group. However, the study group attracted its own
50 share of Labour MPs critical of drastic defence cuts, not least because of employment
51 reasons. Among these were ministers of state at the various departments involved with
52 military procurement, specifically the Ministry of Defence, Foreign Office and the
53 Department of Industry. One of the most frequent attendees was Les Huckfield, the
54 industry minister who, along with Kaufman, was chiefly involved in corresponding
55 with the Lucas combine. Huckfield had exhibited more centre-left inclinations than
56 Kaufman, and his correspondence displayed more empathy with the overall aims of
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the combine to avert redundancies. Nonetheless, his dismissal of the combine's plans was equally firm. In a revealing meeting with left-wing MPs on the defence study group, Huckfield outlined his opposition to the combine in detail.

Huckfield admitted that he regarded the Lucas combine as 'a worthwhile initiative', which had aimed to 'utilize relevant skills in new ways', and forming a 'constructive approach... where large scale restructuring was a possibility'.⁶⁹ However, this possibility was subject to conditions that the Labour minister sounded as a note of caution to his left-wing Party colleagues. Firstly, he thought that such diversification would take longer than what had been immediately envisioned by the combine, being of the belief that 'a timescale of something like five years would be required to secure a large scale transition from military to civil production that makes proper use of the workforce'.⁷⁰ This was explained by the demand of the market on which 'job opportunities depended first of all'. It was clear that production would have to be directed towards an existing market, or else a new market would 'have to be won... and not be taken for granted', with Huckfield warning that it took 'years of often heavy investment, to either break into new markets or significantly expand an existing one'. Rapidly enacted industrial conversion would be open to what Huckfield considered 'high commercial risk for the companies concerned, and may involve calls for large scale government support'. There were concerns about the financial and employment implications. 'New jobs', the minister contended, 'must not be at the expense of other workers' jobs in industries already producing for markets into which defence industries might expand'. This was a clear reference to the lack of attention the combine gave to appealing to private industry. The focus of the combine was reliant on the state as the main customer, where public expenditure would be diverted into social utility rather than defence expenditure. This question of political economy, so central to the outcome of the combine, was effectively being shut down by the Labour ministers inside the Department of Industry on the grounds of the risk that could be posed to employment and manufacturing.

In the second half of his paper, Huckfield reiterated his earlier points on the risk to employment, but in more explicit terms, and with a focus on the virtues of military industry as major employer. While expressing 'a great deal of sympathy', for the combine, he was concerned at 'the very severe depression in the civilian side of aircraft and shipbuilding' which was 'changing the emphasis of the markets for defence industries in the short term'.⁷¹ Huckfield made the link between the shrinking civilian market and the value of the defence sector, highlighting more clearly than ever before on its role as a major employer. 'Defence industries', particularly in a regional capacity 'were an important part of industrial structure', and were 'of material value to associated civilian industry'. Pertaining to Lucas, the minister remarked how 'in aerospace in particular, defence research and development has an important benefit for the viability of the civil industry'. Moreover, the export market, which was quoted by him as being worth some £850million per year could only be sustained 'if the UK armed services continued to show confidence in it by buying it themselves'. This was a reference to the role of Lucas Aerospace in the Tornado military aircraft, with an optimistic forecast on its potential on the export market. Concluding the paper, Huckfield saw the solution as being in the hands of the trade unions:

I believe we should take account of the trade unions which already organise in the defence industries and the views they frequently express to Government departments and ministers. They understand the difficulties

which are likely to be encountered in any transition from military to civilian work. What they tell us often is precisely the same point which I want to make in this submission - that any such transition will take a longer time than is frequently thought and must be carefully planned.

While Labour ministers referred the combine to the trade unions, other Labour MPs were more supportive and provided much needed fortification for the combine. Two MPs, Audrey Wise and Jeff Rooker, identified with workers' control and anti-militarism. Consequently, the Lucas combine gained exposure in parliamentary debates. For example, when the annual government defence White Paper was debated in March 1977, Audrey Wise addressed the issue along economic lines, stating how the 'greater our economic dependence on arms production, the more difficult we shall find it to respond to genuine initiatives on controlled disarmament'.⁷² Wise made reference to the combine's alternative plan, and pleaded for the Labour Government ministers that 'if we are ever to move towards controlled disarmament we shall have to look at alternative sources of employment for our people'.⁷³

The combine was also a feature of constituency level politics as Labour MPs with a local interest in Lucas Aerospace appealed directly to the industry ministers. Doug Hoyle, the MP for the Lancashire seat of Nelson and Colne near the Lucas plant at Burnley, wrote to Kaufman expressing his belief that it 'was monstrous that people [were] being thrown out of work when an alternative corporate plan that would prove beneficial to the nation is disregarded'.⁷⁴ The plight of the Lucas combine was aired in the House of Commons during the final parliamentary debate on Roy Mason's Defence Review on 1 April 1976. The Labour Left MP Tom Litterick, motivated by local concerns due to his constituency at Birmingham Selly Oak, commended the combine for having 'worked out an armaments substitute production strategy in which workers use their sophisticated skills to produce useful articles which do not threaten anyone, thus maintaining work and sensible economic activity in place of a destructive, wasteful and wholly inflationary economic activity'.⁷⁵ Litterick went further to accuse the Labour Government of turning a blind eye to potentially 'embarrassing policy statements such as those which have emerged from the workers of Lucas Aerospace, because the paranoia which underlies our arms strategy might be challenged by the voice of sanity, peace and hope for the rest of humanity'.⁷⁶ The petitions made by backbench Labour MPs reached the very top of the political pyramid when the Prime Minister Jim Callaghan responded to a letter from Dan Jones, the Labour MP for Burnley, where Lucas Aerospace was a significant local employer. Callaghan began by 'praising the efforts of the Lucas shop stewards... in a most welcome contribution to the national industrial relations scene'.⁷⁷ The Prime Minister's response sought to praise the Labour ministers who had been involved with the combine, citing that 'as a result of the actions of Eric Varley, Tony Benn and Gerald Kaufman there are now central discussions taking place between the Lucas management' and the relevant unions. Responding to Jones' request for a tripartite meeting between the combine, the company management and the government, Callaghan felt that it could be organised 'if it was felt that would help, before adding that 'as I hope you will agree, after looking fairly at the Government's record in this case, that the part taken by Ministers has been wholly constructive and that the best thing to do now is wait'.⁷⁸

While experiencing frustration with the response from Labour ministers, the combine was met with enthusiasm from the wider disarmament movement. The workers' phrase of 'neither bombs nor dole, but conversion'

resonated with the peace movement, not least because the combine had provided a practicable solution that had contrasted with the largely moralistic approach of nuclear unilateralists.⁷⁹ In this sense, the combine compensated for the lack of technological expertise by those on the academic and political left. One shop steward remarked that ‘the disarmament movement had failed to come up with an alternative, but once the workers had provided something detailed and credible the peace groups gave a lot of support’.⁸⁰ CND was enthusiastic in its support for the combine, where delegates at its annual conference in 1978 acknowledged that ‘the situation had worsened’ insofar as ‘the management had sought to offer redundancies in trying to undermine the Lucas Combine Committee’.⁸¹ CND thus resolved to place ‘greater emphasis on the promotion of alternatives to employment of people and resources in the arms industries and the armed forces’.⁸² CND’s general secretary Duncan Rees recalled that the combine had ‘broadened the debate to arms manufacture’ and so demonstrated that the ‘moral dimension of disarmament had a practical side, creating or saving jobs at the same time as reducing armaments’.⁸³ The conference was addressed by Mike Cooley, a shop steward from the combine, who saw the CND as a potential vehicle for ‘ideas to be diffused as widely as possible to the rest of society’.⁸⁴ A resolution tendered by the specialist branch, Trade Union CND, who argued that ‘if the campaign for cuts in arms spending is to succeed in times of heavy unemployment, than the work of the Lucas stewards and others need to be matched by much stronger public demand’ for socially useful production.⁸⁵

The reaction from the trade unions

The Labour Government had continually referred the combine to their relevant trade unions. The combine-union reaction would prove to be a mixed one, varying from union to union, and ultimately providing the main obstacle to any chance of implementing the combine’s plan for socially useful production. The combine initially enjoyed a favourable reaction from the most powerful union platform in Britain, the Trade Union Congress (TUC). Correspondence between the combine and the TUC began in a letter alerting it to Lucas Aerospace’s ‘plans for further redundancies at a number of sites’, and so representing a ‘multinational company intent on sacking highly skilled workers that you and this country so badly needs’.⁸⁶ The secretary of the TUC’s economic department, David Lea, responded to the combine, ‘sharing their concerns about the company’s unwillingness to meet’, and explained how the case of the Lucas workers had been discussed at a recent meeting of the TUC’s Industrial Strategy Staff Group.⁸⁷ Yet, the TUC was inclined to divert the combine in the direction of the company management, suggesting that the combine ‘again approach the company on this matter... pointing out that workers have an interest in and a responsibility for planning for a company’s future’.⁸⁸ Writing to the Lucas’ director of personnel, the combine included a copy of the TUC letter, ‘acquainting the management with the TUC viewpoint’.⁸⁹ The Lucas management issued a sharp response, stating that it would not recognise the combine as an official body, and that the company ‘would not make any arrangement that would prejudice the exiting procedural arrangements we have between both staff and the manual unions’.⁹⁰ This response infuriated the combine, with the combine secretary Ernie Scarbrow stating that Lucas had performed a ‘complete shift in policy’ and that ‘not recognising the combine, represents for us a very serious situation’.⁹¹

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3 However, the display of support from the TUC, even if it was vague, was met
4 with consternation from individual unions who had involvement with Lucas
5 Aerospace. The combine committee was deemed by smaller unions as an 'unofficial
6 body' and, the union resented the intervention of the TUC which he felt had 'cut
7 across the official trade union movement within Lucas'.⁹² The advice given by the
8 TUC to the combine was thus 'misleading' in the encouragement it gave, and the
9 union felt it was the responsibility of the TUC to correct it. This episode was
10 indicative of the contemporary trade union environment, in which the TUC did not
11 seek to over-ride individual unions on matters of industrial dispute at a local level. An
12 apologetic David Lea responded directly, retracting his earlier encouragement to the
13 combine, and stating 'it was a matter of regret when existing procedures are
14 accidentally cut across'.⁹³ It was evident that this had been a chastening experience
15 for representatives in the TUC. From this point onwards, as the archival holdings
16 suggest, the TUC's involvement was notable by its absence.

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18 Instead, the key union for the prospects of the Lucas combine was the
19 Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions (known as the CSEU, or
20 Confederation for short) which acted as an umbrella organisation for a series of
21 smaller technical unions in shipbuilding and aerospace. The Confederation would
22 prove to be the ultimate obstacle to the combine, as the workers recalled that its
23 'insistence on controlling all contact between trade unionists in engineering and
24 government ministers proved to be a major difficulty'.⁹⁴ The Confederation ultimately
25 adopted the role of dealing with the combine directly, filling a void that was
26 purposefully left for them by the Labour ministers at the Department of Industry. This
27 view was held by the combine itself, who viewed the Confederation and the Labour
28 ministers as being of two sides of the same problem. Gerald Kaufman expressed the
29 'clear understanding from the Department that the Confederation would respond in a
30 positive way to requests from the Combine Committee, provided of course [it] uses
31 the established trade-union machinery'.⁹⁵ This view was shared by Les Huckfield in
32 his correspondence with Labour's National Executive Committee that same month,
33 stressing that 'plans should initially be discussed by with the Lucas management
34 through recognised trade union channels'.⁹⁶ This was evidently the preferred option of
35 the Labour ministers, rather than direct intervention.

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37 The terminology of 'recognised trade union channels' was interpreted as a
38 'creeping innuendo' by the Lucas combine.⁹⁷ It was significant in two ways, both of
39 which would impede the alternative plan. Firstly, the Labour ministers abdicated the
40 possibility of direct intervention, electing instead to defer to union policy to steer the
41 course between the combine and the Lucas management. Secondly, there was the
42 issue of official recognition of the combine by Confederation. The Lucas combine
43 was not an official union body, and was instead regarded as having represented
44 employees from a variety of different Lucas facilities nationwide. This diminished the
45 standing of the combine in the view of both the ministers and the unions. What made
46 the situation more difficult for the combine was that their fate now rested on union
47 intervention, given that a Department of Industry had gradually withdrawn from
48 making direct approaches to the Lucas management.

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50 Relations between the combine and the Confederation were fraught from the
51 offset. Feeling 'surprise and disappointment that there was no response' to an earlier
52 letter, Scarbrow lamented how 'it might be just a matter of routine for you, but for us
53 it is a matter of whether we will lose our jobs or not', and that there was 'no option
54 but to inform the ministers that there was no response from the trade union'.⁹⁸ This
55 began a process in which the combine sought a 'tripartite meeting' between
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3 themselves, the Lucas management and the Department of Industry, and so would
4 bypass the Confederation altogether. The combine wrote to the industry secretary Eric
5 Varley in order to 'establish precisely why the Company is unwilling to discuss [the]
6 plans', and citing how 'a more direct action is required by the government' to 'break
7 out of this impasse that the Company's intransigence is placing on us'.⁹⁹ Varley did
8 not respond, in keeping with his general lack of correspondence with the combine
9 after 1976. Instead Huckfield again replied to the combine, stating that both he and
10 Kaufman approached the Confederation, and had felt that this was the best channel for
11 advancing the initiative.¹⁰⁰ At this point the exasperation felt by the combine had
12 manifested in its correspondence. In another letter, again directed to Varley, the
13 combine articulated how it was 'continually given the impression by the Company
14 that the Department supports them against us', and saw 'no good reason why the
15 Department would not accede to the request' for a tripartite meeting.¹⁰¹ Huckfield
16 tried to allay the grievances felt by the combine in remarking how he was 'sorry that
17 you got the impression that the government was supporting the management against
18 the workforce', reinforcing that both he and Kaufman had 'told the management that
19 we would be most concerned at redundancies'.¹⁰²

22 Nonetheless, by deferring to the trade unions, the Labour ministers had
23 empowered the Confederation to deal with the combine. Over the course of 1978, the
24 Confederation met the Lucas management with increased frequency. The first such
25 meeting occurred in March 1978, and later in July. Huckfield was pleased to note that
26 a 'working group' had been established, including 'some members of the Combine
27 Shop Stewards Committee', with the aim of 'visiting sites threatened with closure'.
28 He was hopeful that the work of the combine could be utilised, believing that 'the
29 intention is to report on the prospects for alternative work at these sites, and no doubt
30 the working party will take into account the suggestions for alternative products in the
31 Plan'.¹⁰³ However, it was evident from the outset that the Confederation was
32 unwilling to recognise the combine as an official trade union group. The minutes of
33 the Confederation's Executive Committee record how an application from the
34 combine 'for official recognition' was received in April 1978. Nonetheless, the
35 Confederation leadership stated that there 'was no provision in the constitution for the
36 recognition of combine committees'.¹⁰⁴ This major trade union, which represented
37 workers across a broad spectrum of mechanical engineering across Britain, did not
38 want a smaller, unofficial combine of potentially militant left-wing shop-stewards
39 meddling in its relations with business. The Confederation, in its capacity as the
40 largest representative of skilled labour in Lucas Aerospace, used its influence to
41 discuss with the company management directly, over the heads of the workers. This
42 was clear in a series of meetings in 1978, just as the combine was beginning to lose its
43 momentum.

46 When the Confederation did engage with the Lucas management, it was not on
47 the issues of either the combine or alternative production. Instead, the Confederation
48 took its own interest of 'requesting a meeting of the management on employment
49 prospects' of the company.¹⁰⁵ In reply, the Lucas management stated that 'it was
50 making a detailed assessment of the business... but it was certainly the intention to
51 meet'.¹⁰⁶ The Confederation liaised with the Lucas management on its restructuring of
52 the aerospace sector, and 'would endorse the decision to campaign for the buying of
53 20 British 111-600 series', a commercial jet aimed for Boeing in the American market
54 'and that the Executive Committee would be kept fully informed regarding further
55 arrangements'.¹⁰⁷ The issue was of contemporary significance, as the specific aircraft
56 was debated in the House of Lords the following month.¹⁰⁸ The Confederation was
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3 evidently more concerned with sustaining employment, making formal
4 representations to the Lucas management. A belief existed within the union that it
5 held significant sway, recording that after having discussions within the management
6 about the restructuring of the company. The announcement in May 1978 of a new
7 Lucas Aerospace plant in Huyton, Liverpool, with the employment of some 500
8 skilled workers, was 'met with satisfaction' from the Confederation, which
9 confidently asserted that 'there was no doubt that our representations had an influence
10 on this matter'.¹⁰⁹

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12 The revelation of the new plant in Huyton aroused suspicion and
13 disappointment from the combine. The constituency's sitting MP was none other than
14 the former Labour Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, and the combine did not hesitate to
15 accuse the Labour Government, Department of Industry and the Confederation of
16 having a close relationship with Lucas Aerospace. Ernie Scarbrow's letter to Jeff
17 Rooker, a Liverpool MP who supported the combine, showed what he felt was the
18 reasoning behind the Government's announcement:
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21 We now think that the inactivity of the Department of Industry may be
22 more sinister than just bureaucratic obstruction... Lucas is heavily
23 dependent on government purchasing power, not only in the aircraft
24 industry but also in the automotive field... we think they would not have
25 dared to announce a factory closure in somewhere as sensitive as Liverpool
26 without a nod from somewhere in government. The Lucas Aerospace
27 Combine was seeking a parliamentary enquiry into the role of the
28 Department of Industry in all of this.¹¹⁰
29

30 Although the Confederation had a clear ownership of the combine issue, there was
31 evidence of dissent from some smaller unions, who called into question the role
32 played by both the major unions and the Labour Government in the apparent impasse.
33 In July 1978, a resolution was passed by the Coventry branch of the Amalgamated
34 Union of Engineering Workers, an area close to both Lucas Aerospace and Rolls
35 Royce facilities. The resolution called 'upon the Government to investigate the
36 obstruction by ministers and their colleagues' into the situation, and sought 'an open
37 and public debate on the role that ministers played in the matter'.¹¹¹ Huckfield
38 responded directly by reiterating how the Department of Industry had 'consistently
39 welcomed the efforts' of the combine, 'but felt that detailed discussion' about the
40 workers' plan 'should take place between representatives of the workforce and
41 company management'.¹¹² That same month, the Labour MP Jeff Rooker referred to
42 the resolution in the Commons, calling on Kaufman at ministers' questions to respond
43 to the 'inquiry into the role of the Department of Industry in the last two years, when
44 it has done nothing to help these workers'.¹¹³ Kaufman responded to Rooker by
45 emphasising that if the 'Confederation comes forward with plans or asks for a
46 tripartite meeting, the Government will convene it'.
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49 In 1978, a half-hour documentary was commissioned by the Open University
50 in conjunction with the Centre for Alternative, Industrial and Technological Systems
51 (CAITS) to detail the combine's experience. Entitled, 'Doesn't Anybody Want to
52 Know?', the documentary featured interviews with combine members across the
53 country, including workers on the shop floor and shop stewards such as Mike Cooley
54 and Ernie Scarbrow. The documentary vividly captured the frustration felt by the
55 combine towards the Labour Government, Lucas management and trade unions. Mike
56 Cooley argued that the main obstacle was the 'concern felt by the company at the shift
57 in power to the workers', while the trade unions refused to recognise the workers'
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plan as it ‘operated outside of union traditions’.¹¹⁴ The documentary also featured interviews with Labour MPs Jeff Rooker and Audrey Wise who lamented ‘the great myth as far as the Lucas Aerospace shop stewards are concerned that parliament runs the country’ when it was the ‘executive branch of government in Whitehall’ made the major decisions. With the bleak forecast of further job losses across Lucas Aerospace, the tone of the documentary was rueful of the lost opportunities of the 1970s. The Labour Government was criticised for its inaction, despite Tony Benn, at that point the energy minister, giving his own analysis of the combine. Benn was evidently in favour of the combine’s alternative plans, as he had been when he first met the workers in 1974. However, his advice to the workers’ when interviewed in the documentary was to take the ‘long term perspective’. His comparison of the combine to the radical movements of the Levellers and the Chartists was met by derision from the makers of the documentary who scorned how:

‘The long-term perspective may be fine for a politician like Tony Benn, but it doesn’t deal with the immediate prospect of plan closures and loss of jobs that the alternative corporate plan was designed to avoid’.¹¹⁵

The fortunes of the combine were not to improve after these series of challenges from the Labour Government and the trade unions. Labour’s defeat at the 1979 General Election, while not ending the activity of the combine outright, did herald a new set of challenges. The Conservatives were against the idea of workers’ cooperatives, and did not give much consideration to industrial conversion. The workers recalled that this in effect let the Lucas management off the hook, as the ‘company avoided the embarrassment of any political limelight that the discussions on alternative products might have attracted under a Labour Government’.¹¹⁶ No such interest was expressed from the Labour ministers, let alone on the Conservative side. Instead as the early 1980s unfolded, what the combine considered as ‘the abrasively anti-union atmosphere of the Thatcher government’ fostered an environment in which Lucas Aerospace ‘could move more directly to undermine trade-union strength’.¹¹⁷ There was admissions of exhaustion and exasperation from the combine itself, having been ‘entangled for three years in the ropes of Confederation procedures and the red tape of the Department of Industry, was [no longer] in a position to stand up to the new offensive’.¹¹⁸

Conclusions

The Lucas combine was venerated by the left who continued their attack on British defence expenditure into the 1980s. In two of the most famous left-wing accounts of Cold War militarism, Mary Kaldor referenced the case of the Lucas combine, both in the 1980 *Protest and Survive* and in her own *Baroque Arsenal* in 1982, which argued of a military-industrial-complex within the western powers.¹¹⁹ The example of Lucas was clearly seen in another combine in a major British defence manufacturer, Vickers, who produced military aircraft and shipping, including the new sea-based nuclear deterrent, Trident. The case of the workers at Vickers met with similar resistance from company management, and was accounted for in significant detail, again by Hilary Wainwright.¹²⁰ Despite the decline of the Lucas combine by the late 1970s, its example was adopted by leftist academics who in 1978 established the Centre for Alternative Industrial and Technological Systems (CAITS) and the North London Polytechnic. The combine became a beacon for the 1980s campaign for alternative

production in the technology industry, as evidenced by Mike Cooley's influential scientific account *Architect or Bee?* that included a retrospective account, 'The Lucas Combine Ten Years On'.¹²¹ Although the combine failed to achieve its objectives in the 1970s, its legacy continued to be significant among left-wing academics and workers.

The Lucas combine succeeded at the very least in exemplifying how industrial conversion could be achieved. That the combine co-existed independently from the influence of the left-wing on the Labour Party is an important consideration. 'Socially useful production' was not the preserve of the academic and political spheres; instead it was more evident and at an earlier stage in the defence industry. There was a growing belief that workers could provide the alternative. This was, as Richard Hyman argued in 1975, a response to the industrial crises of the early 1970s, where workers adopted what he regarded as a 'positive challenge to the employer, involving a different relationship of control'.¹²² Michael Gold elaborated on this change of relationship at more length in 2004 when reviewing industrial relations in the 1970s, including the Lucas combine:

These positive challenges to the employer reveal attempts to harness creatively the motivation and commitment to defend their jobs in times of threat. They all took into account the specific circumstances of the workers involved, such as their labour-market conditions, the size and structure of the industry concerned, the nature of the product markets, skill profile and links to the wider community.¹²³

The Lucas combine is regarded more recently by the left as a triumph of worker's ambition for alternative production. A *Guardian* article in 2014 recalled how 'half of Lucas' output supplied military contracts [which] depended upon public funds', and so 'workers argued state support be better put to developing more socially useful products'.¹²⁴ Another *Guardian* article argued that the Lucas combine 'challenged some of the presumed technophobia of the left', that was felt that leftist thinkers were limited only to theoretical frameworks, and not actual prototypes.¹²⁵ The socialist magazine, *Red Pepper*, remarked that the 'alternative plan and the combine committee were a classic product of the co-operative, egalitarian creativity of the late 1960s and 1970s' which challenged 'authority and sought individual realisation'.¹²⁶ But the combine instead 'came up against trade union, government and management institutions stuck in the command and control mentalities, and the power of the movement was destroyed by Thatcher's onslaught against the unions and radical local government in the 1980s'.¹²⁷ However, it was not simply the arrival of a Conservative Government in 1979 that defeated the Lucas combine. It was also argued to have been undone by 'a retreat from radicalism of the Labour Government' after coming to office in 1974, and by the 'suspicion and intransigence of some sections of the national leadership of the trade unions'.¹²⁸

The legacy of the Lucas combine can be seen in more recent critiques of British defence-industrial policy. Economic circumstances have prompted a greater scrutiny on public expenditure, with defence being the main target for left-wing opposition, just as it had been in the 1970s. The left-wing of the Parliamentary Labour Party is not as sizeable as it was in the 1970s, and external peace-movements have provided the most significant enquiry into the political economy of defence spending. For instance, workers at the Unite union in 2016 issued a pamphlet, *Unite against*

Trident, which detailed ‘an alternative vision of expanding employment away from arms production and into renewable energy and environmental technologies’.¹²⁹ More publicly, CND has framed its opposition to the Trident replacement system by arguing that public expenditure would be better spent on the socially useful production, especially in healthcare. Moreover, CND have rejected the case that cancellation of Trident would cost jobs by arguing that this technological expertise could be employed in civilian industries.¹³⁰ The Lucas combine continues to provide an example of how industrial conversion could be achieved, with a clear similarity to the economic conditions in the 1970s that intensifies left-wing ambitions for change. Nonetheless, there still exists a reliance on the government to enact radical changes in policy. With a broad consensus on the nuclear question, as was the case during the Cold War, left-wing activists continue to campaign against the long established patterns of defence-industrial policies.

Arguably the most considered critique of the Lucas combine was a review of *The Lucas Plan: A New Trade Unionism in the Making?* by *Marxism Today* in 1982. The reviewer, Grahame Thompson, praised the ‘fascinating and enterprising attempt to preserve jobs’ from the combine, but added two important critical observations. Firstly, the combine was by its nature fragmented over a combination of regional facilities, and a lack of a ‘nationally agreed strategy’ meant that it was ‘unlikely that the range of products could be successfully produced or marketed’. To this end, Thompson thought the combine was being ‘too ambitious rather than not being ambitious enough’, and should have curtailed its energy into a restricted number of marketable products.¹³¹ The second critique cut to the core of the ‘socially-useful’ ideal, noting that concept of ‘socially useful production’ remained ‘relatively unexplored’ in the workers’ plan. Thompson argued that although the combine’s prototypes were technically feasible and of apparent social utility, this was ‘no argument that they would provide a financially and economically viable set of products’. Thompson challenged the conceptual underpinning that motivated the combine, as well as the intellectual left had that encouraged it:

We need to question whether armaments production is not as socially useful as is made out. Clearly this *one* of the UK’s most successful industries, and measured in terms of international competitiveness and the absence of a benign international situation, quite a socially useful one, it could be argued. What is not socially useful about wanting to defend one’s national integrity as best one can? As it stands, the authors of the *Lucas Plan* adopt a somewhat moralistic attitude towards what is socially useful or not, mirroring the more general Left hostility towards arms production.

That the defence industry was one of Britain’s more successful industries, as Thompson observed, is a crucial point in the failure of the combine. While the workers focused on the social utility of the alternatives to defence production, they failed to both take account of the success of Lucas Aerospace as a military contractor and as to where a new market for socially useful products could be cultivated. The combine needs to be seen within the context of British weapon procurement policy in the Cold War. The policy of successive governments to ‘buy British’ enabled firms such as Lucas to become more reliant on lucrative defence contracts and developed a close working relationship between the company and government departments such as the Ministry of Defence and the Department of Industry.¹³² The motivation of the combine was twofold - to move away from defence production, and to redirect control

of production away from the company-state-union axis towards the workers. But ultimately, on both defence and industrial reform, the Lucas combine was unassisted by a Labour Government unwilling to impede on military production and the trade union status quo. In so doing, Labour's defence and industrial policy continued to be resistant to change. The Lucas Aerospace combine was seen, as early as the 1980s, as being of its time. The combine was deemed as being 'correctly hesitant about the adequacy of nationalisation as a socialist objective', but had still not plotted a definitive way forward for those on the left. 'Fresh approaches', Grahame Thompson remarked in 1983, would 'also need to be developed that do not uncritically endorse or fetishise "workers initiatives" either'.¹³³

¹ Coopey and Woodward, *Britain in the 1970s*; Philips, 'Industrial Relations, Historical Contingencies and Political Economy: Britain in the 1960s and 1970s'; Seldon and Hickson *New Labour, Old Labour: the Wilson and Callaghan Governments, 1974-79*; Tomlinson, 'British Government and Popular Understanding of Inflation in the Mid-1970s', 750-768.

² Dunne, 'The Changing Military Industrial Complex in the UK', 91-111; Gummet, 'Civil and Military Aircraft in the UK', 203-222; Hartley, 'The Defence Economy' in Coopey and Woodward, *Britain in the 1970s*, 212-35.

³ Weapon procurement has been argued as being 'the poor relation of the historiography of British defence policy' by Chin, *British Defence Procurement and the Futility of Reform*, 1.

⁴ Two of the most significant examples of this are Edgerton, *Warfare State: Britain, 1920-1970*; Peden, *Arms, Economics and British Strategy*.

⁵ Examples of this literature include Allaun, *The Wasted £300,000,000*; Kaldor, Smith and Cook, *An Anti-White Paper, Sense about Defence: The Report of the Labour Party Defence Study Group*; Kaldor, Smith and Vines, *Democratic Socialism and the Cost of Defence*.

⁶ Taylor and Pritchard, *The Protest Makers: The British Nuclear Disarmament Movement of 1958-1965, Twenty Years On*, 137-40; Pimlott, 'Trade Unions and the Second Coming of CND' in Cook and Pimlott, *Trade Unions in British Politics: The First 250 Years*, 206-7.

⁷ This was later published as the *Lucas Aerospace Combine Shop Stewards' Committee: Democracy versus the Circumlocution Office*, Institute for Workers' Control Pamphlet no. 65, March 1979.

⁸ *Sense about Defence*, 146.

⁹ Edgerton, *Warfare State*, 268-9.

¹⁰ The combine's experience was articulated by Elliot in a Fabian pamphlet, and then subsequently with Wainwright in a paperback, *The Lucas Plan: A New Trade Unionism in the Making?*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹² Nockholds, *Lucas: The First Hundred Years*, 306.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 312.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Straw and Young, 'The Wilson Government and the Demise of TSR-2, October 1964 - April 1965'.

¹⁶ Nockholds, *Lucas: The First Hundred Years*, 287.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Wainwright and Elliot, *The Lucas Plan*, 1.

¹⁹ Hayward, *The British Aircraft Industry*, 121-6.

²⁰ Wainwright and Elliot, *The Lucas Plan*, 16.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

²² See Smith, 'Defence Contractors and Diversification into the Civil Sector: Rolls-Royce, 1945-2005'.

²³ Wainwright and Elliot, *The Lucas Plan*, 296.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁵ Elliot, *The Lucas Aerospace Workers' Campaign*, 4.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁷ The political sympathies of Cooley and Scarbrow is not articulated in accounts of the combine, but is mentioned by Benn in his diary entry, when he describes the combine leadership as being an 'international socialist' and a 'communist' respectively. See Benn, *Against the Tide*, 505.

²⁸ Wainwright and Elliot, *The Lucas Plan*, 83.

²⁹ Elliot, *The Lucas Aerospace Workers' Campaign*, 4.

³⁰ Wainwright and Elliot, *The Lucas Plan*, 1.

³¹ This case was made at length by Kaldor in *Baroque Arsenal*, which specifically referenced the Lucas combine on 216.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Papers deposited from Hilary Wainwright to the Labour History Archive and Study Centre (LHASC), WAIN/8/9-18, Ernie Scarbrow to Tony Benn, 6 July 1974.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ LHASC, WAIN/8/9-18, Tony Benn to Ernie Scarbrow, 2 August 1974.

³⁶ Wainwright and Elliot, *The Lucas Plan*, 83.

³⁷ Foster and Woolfson, 'How Workers on the Clyde Gained the Capacity for Class Struggle: The Upper Clyde Shipbuilders' Work-In, 1971-2', in Campbell, Fishman and McIlroy, *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics*, 297-325.

³⁸ Kaufman, 'Eric Varley, Baron Varley (1932-2008)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, January 2012.

³⁹ Kaufman, *How to be a Minister* (London, 1980), 132.

⁴⁰ LHASC, WAIN/8/9-18, 'Summary of the Meeting between the Lucas Aerospace Shop Stewards Combine Committee with the Secretary of State for Industry, Mr Anthony Wedgwood Benn, at the Department of Industry, Victoria Street, London S.W.1 on Monday 11 November 1974'.

⁴¹ LHASC, WAIN/8/9-18, WAIN/8/9-18, 'Summary of the Meeting between the Lucas Aerospace Shop Stewards Combine Committee with the Secretary of State for Industry, Mr Anthony Wedgwood Benn.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Benn, *Against the Tide*, 262.

⁴⁴ Ibid.505.

⁴⁵ Elliot, *The Lucas Aerospace Workers' Campaign*, 4.

⁴⁶ Wainwright and Elliot, *The Lucas Plan*, 10.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 140.

⁴⁹ Elliot, *The Lucas Aerospace Workers Campaign*, 5.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

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